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ABSTRACT

This paper identifies those factors and processes critical to promoting interagency collaboration between school and community agencies represented on the Individual Transition Teams (ITT) of students with severe disabilities. The ITT's goal is to assist the student in obtaining the most satisfactory transition possible into meaningful work and living environments upon completion of the high school program. Teams may be composed of: schools; vocational rehabilitation, medical, social security, and developmental disabilities services; mental health/mental retardation agencies; parent organizations; private vendors; and community volunteers. The characteristics of an effective team, identified by C. E. Larson and F. M. J. LaFasto (1989), are applied to the local school transition committee and include: a clear, elevating goal; a result-driven structure; competent members; unified commitment; a collaborative climate; standards of excellence; external support and recognition; and principled leadership. Other team-building components are also discussed, including team organization and responsibilities, operationalizing the team, roles of team members, team planning, and common problems. The paper concludes that the challenge is to synchronize education and human service systems into a unified network that can free persons with severe disabilities to participate in a social system which bases one's value on his or her contribution to society. (32 references) (JDD)

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BUILDING INTERAGENCY TEAMS TO SUPPORT TRANSITION OF STUDENTS WITH SEVERE DISABILITIES

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BUILDING INTERAGENCY TEAMS TO SUPPORT TRANSITION OF STUDENTS WITH SEVERE DISABILITIES

As special education programs for students with severe disabilities become more outcomes directed and community based, a greater emphasis will be placed on transitioning students from school settings to adult living in appropriate community environments. Since students are products of our special education programs, the success of these programs depend in part on students making satisfactory adjustments from school settings to community living environments. Successful transition, of students with challenging disabilities into adult living, necessitates cooperation between school and community agencies.

Transitional needs of this student population require extensive cooperation and collaboration of a variety of agencies which include schools; vocational rehabilitation, medical, social security services, and developmental disabilities services; mental health/mental retardation agencies; parent organizations; private venders; and community volunteers. Regardless of the type transition model/system being used (Browder, 1987; Halpern, 1985) or agencies involved in the transition process, the critical factor, in assisting young adults with severe disabilities to experience successful transition to meaningful adult living is the efficiency and effectiveness with which interagency collaboration occurs among members of the Individual Transition Team (hereafter referred to as ITT).

The focus of this paper is to identify those factors and/or processes which are critical to promoting interagency collaboration between school and community agencies represented on the student's ITT. The ultimate goal of the team is to assist the student in obtaining the most satisfactory transition possible into meaningful work and living environments upon completion of his/her high school program.

Understanding And Appreciating The Roles Of Transition Team Members

Members of the ITT represent those agencies which can provide information, services, and support pertinent to the transition process from school to adult, community living. Understanding functions and services that agencies can provide in the transition process is most germane to the effectiveness of student transition.

Not only, is it important for the team to have accurate information of agency roles and services, but equally important is being able to communicate this information in developing and implementing transition plans for students completing their high school programs. Once information is shared among team members regarding available community services to meet the needs of students and families, meaningful transition planning is possible with a reasonable expectation of success.

The basic philosophical principle related to successful team building is providing support to the consumer in an environment of dignity and respect (Browder, 1987). This consumer driven philosophy becomes the prism through which divergent support

systems are synthesized into a single outcome of students making meaningful adjustments in normalized community environments.

Key participants on the ITT generally include representatives from special education, vocational education, vocational rehabilitation, mental health/ mental retardation agencies, developmental disabilities, parent/guardian, and students (Wehman, et al., 1987). If ITT members are going to be successful in solving problems associated with preparing students with severe disabilities to live and work in community environments following school, they will need to learn how to work together effectively. Larson and LaFasto (1989) conducted an extensive research project which included a large number of committees and networking systems across a variety of settings in order to identify critical factors, characteristics, and/or processes which describe and explain effective teams and teamwork. Teams/committees that were studied represented such groups as a national championship collegiate football team, the Center for Disease Control, a Presidential Commission, a President's Cabinet, a surgery team, a mountain climbing expedition, a disaster team, a theater production, the armed forces, business companies (IBM, Honeywell, Boeing) and the American Leadership Forum. They identified eight characteristics or properties of effective teaming. These characteristics were:

(1) a clear, elevating goal; (2) a result-driven structure; (3) competent members; (4) unified commitment; (5) a collaborative climate; (6) standards of excellence; (7)

external support and recognition; (8) principled leadership (p. 26).

Larson's and Lafasto's Teaming Characteristics Applied to the Local School Transition Committee

A Clear, Elevating Goal---High performance teams are characterized by having a clear, elevating goal. Team members have a clear understanding of their mission and a belief that the goal will produce worthwhile results. Ineffective teams tend to lose sight of their goal statement, politicize the goal, and/or dilute the main goal by adding too many minor, competitive goals. Whereas, effective teams have and maintain a sense of mission which is an actualized desire to reach a specified, meaningful goal (Garfield, 1986).

The major goal of the ITT is to assist special education students in making successful transitions into adult, community living through acquiring meaningful employment, establishing residential living, and developing social relationships (Browder, 1987; Halpern, 1985; Wehman, et al., 1988).

Results-Driven Structure---Effective teams are structured to obtain results. Team member activity must be based upon an intent to produce results dictated by the team goal. Team structure is influenced by the nature of the goal. Does the goal address problem resolution, creative products, or a tactical situation which entails carrying our a well defined plan of execution of a predefined series of behaviors specific to respective team members? The problem solving structure appears most compatible to the goal of assisting special education students in finding

employment, a place to live, and establishing meaningful social relationships. The reason for this structure is that the team should expect problems and obstacles during the transition process from school to community living. These problem areas may include nonfunctional school curriculums, negative community attitudes toward having persons with disabilities living and working in the community, parent expectations, limited community resources and living options, and limited employment opportunities, and transportation problems (Wehman, et al., 1987). Since the ITT will be concerned with identifying needs of students and families, available community services, and/or becoming involved in expanding needed community opportunities in the areas of work, living, and recreation and leisure, a problem solving team structure will enhance the team in reaching its goal of community transition for students with severe disabilities.

Secondary to team structure, but yet, important to the effectiveness of the team in being results-driven, is that team member roles should be clearly defined with respective role responsibilities specified. Ways of documenting member performances, providing feedback, and making fact-based judgments are important in achieving team goals. In addition, communication is fundamental to team productivity. The communication system must allow for communication of relevant information based upon creditable sources with members having the freedom to question information.

Competent Team Members---Teams that are efficient have competent team members. Competencies in two area are relevant to

the performance of team members. They are competencies in technical skills necessary for achieving desired team goal and personal-social characteristics which facilitate team members being able to work together.

Transition committee members should have appropriate information and professional skills associated with their role expectations. They, also, need to be able to share professional knowledge and skills in identifying, addressing, and solving problems related to goal attainment. Vernon Loucks (Larson & Lafasto, 1989), CEO for Baxter International, conducted research on promotability of over 1500 managers and identified seven essential predictors of executive potential which are relevant to ITT members.

1. **Intellectual Ability**: the ability to secure relevant information, relate and compare data from different sources, and identify issues and relationships: conceptual, analytical, creative.
2. **Results Orientation**: The ability to work toward outcomes and complete what one starts.
3. **Interpersonal Skills**: The ability to relate to the feelings and needs of others, and to convey interest and respect.
4. **Planning and Organizing**: The ability to schedule time and prioritize for self and/or others, to handle multiple activities, and to meet deadlines.
5. **Team Orientation**: The ability to work collaboratively within a complex organization structure.

6. **Maturity**: The willingness to be open and act responsibly when dealing with people and situations.

7. **Presence**: The ability to creative a positive first impression and stand out tactfully (includes verbal and nonverbal communication) (p. 65).

Unified Commitment---This characteristic of effective team building is an elusive element to identify. Commitment in some ways is similar to esprit de corps of the group, yet, it is more than that. There is a sense of identification with the team which is often associated with clearly defined, worthwhile goals. Implied in commitment is involvement and research has shown that involvement of members tends to enhance their commitment to the goals of the team (Dyer, 1977). This commitment is reflected in the leader being able to clearly define team goals and team members becoming actively involved in developing plans/strategies for achieving those goals. Continued commitment to team goals is closely tied to a balance between providing opportunities for individual to actualize personal goals through the process of obtaining team goals. Demanding team unity while providing an appreciation of individual differences is a necessary process for effective teamwork (Larson & Lafasto, 1989).

In order to assure commitment of ITT members to the goal of transition for special education students completing high school, members should have clearly defined responsibilities for which they will be accountable to the team. Appreciation for each member's role should be evidenced through recognition of the

contribution of each member's discipline in the achievement of team goals (Wehman, et al., 1988).

Collaborative Climate---The ability of members of the group to work well with each other is fundamental to the team's ongoing effectiveness in realization of its goal. For a collaborative climate to exist, it is essential that team members have well defined roles, responsibilities, and be accountable to the leader and other team members. In addition to these structure considerations, trust must be developed and maintained among the membership. Elements found by Larson and LaFasto (1989) to be directly related to building trust among team members were: 1) honesty/integrity, 2) openness to sharing ideas, 3) consistent/ predictable behavior, and 4) respect which included treating others with dignity and fairness.

In networking among agencies represented on the ITT, it is important to foster an atmosphere of risk taking among members. Because of the difficulty in finding suitable jobs and places of living for persons with severe disabilities, team members must feel free to be innovative in developing and implementing student transition plans (Hasazi, et al., 1985; Kregel, et al.,1986; McDonnell & Hardman, 1985).

Standards of Excellence---Establishing or recognizing high performance standards by team members is seen as a contributing factor in effective teaming. Maintaining high standards involves setting standards which include individual commitment, motivation, self esteem, performance, individual support and accountability

for standards, and the willingness of the team to exert pressure on itself to achieve standards of excellence.

Standards which the ITT accept directly affect the kinds and types of community situations that the team will access on behalf of students who are transitioning to community living. Educational best practices for persons with mental retardation include community based instruction, integration, chronological-age materials/activities, meaningful employment in the most normalized work setting, and living and recreating in the least restricted community, residential environment (Bates, Renzaglia, & Wehman, 1981; Brinker & Thorpe, 1986; Crapps, Langone, & Swain, 1985; Dudley, 1988; Kennedy, Horner, & Newton, 1989). It is important that the ITT strives for excellence in transitioning students to adulthood.

External Support and Recognition---External support and recognition are critical to successful functioning teams. Support and recognition provide value and creditability to team goals. In turn, value and creditability increase morale, motivation, and commitment of team members to accomplish the established mission of the group. The amount of time, finances, materials, and personnel committed to the group project significantly reflect the value and importance of the team's goal.

With regard to the ITT, this teaming characteristic is most crucial because it greatly facilitates or inhibits the success of the team in carrying out it mission of transitioning students into community settings. If finances, time, and personnel necessary to accomplish this task are inadequate, it will almost ensure the

failure of the team in performing its role on behalf of students challenged by severe disabilities.

Principled Leadership---A team can be organized, structured, and operationalized, but without a well principled leader, it is doomed to failure. Kiefer and Senge (1984) identified five primary dimensions of leadership which are characteristic of effective leaders. These dimensions include:

1) a deep sense of vision or purposefulness;

2) alignment around that vision;

3) empowering people;

4) structural integrity;

5) and the balance of reason and intuition (p.111).

The team leader is responsible for sustaining the team's vision, keeping team members energized and moving forward on the group's task. This is an important consideration for the school's ITT because the leader generally comes from the local education agency. For school leaders to be effective team leaders, they must be informed of the roles and resources of all team members on the ITT. It is important that the team leader have creditability and respect by all team members.

The effectiveness of the local ITT in carrying out its mission of successfully transitioning students from school to community living is directly related to the degree that the team evidences those teaming characteristics discussed by Larson and Lafasto (1989).

Relating Effective Team Building Properties To An Individual Transition Team

Interactive teaming within a holistic, ecological model of service delivery appears to hold the most promise in successfully transitioning students with severe disabilities into adulthood (Browder, 1987; Halpern, 1985; Morsink, Thomas, & Correa, 1991). The interactive team structure can provide each team member with the opportunity to interact with other members on a consultative basis on issues which they have expertise. It also, affords greater probability of collaboration among team members (Johnson & Johnson 1987; Stodden & Boone, 1987; Wehman, et al., 1988).

Consultative and collaborative functions inherent in interactive teaming provide opportunities for **role release** (Lyon & Lyon, 1980) during planning and implementation of transition activities by team members representing different professional disciplines. Role release requires that team members be able to respect and accept consultation from parents and other team members (Bailey, 1986).

Individual Transition Team Organization---The ITT is composed of a core membership representing education, habilitation, day support programs for adults with developmental disabilities, and families. Agency representatives from these agencies should include special education, vocational education, vocational rehabilitation, local mental health/mental retardation agencies, developmental disabilities services, and a parent advocate and/or a client representative (Wehman, et al., 1988). Moon, Diambera,

and Hill (1990) outline general responsibilities of a core transition team in organizing transitional services for this student population:

1. Conduct a needs assessment for transition services in the school/community, e.g., identifying school vocational training programs and adult services.
2. Establish guidelines for interagency transition planning, e.g., target student population for transition; determine the age to begin formal transition planning; outline the procedures for developing individual transition plans; define roles and functions of transition team members; plan inservice training programs.
3. Develop a local interagency agreement and action plan, e.g., statement of mission; identify goals to be achieved by the team; identify team members' responsibilities and deadlines.
4. Organize a transition planning team and identify team members.
5. Hold initial transition meeting during the Individual Education Plan (hereafter referred to as the IEP) conference and develop an individual transition plan (hereafter referred to as the ITP) as a part of the IEP.
6. Implement and update transition plans at the annual review conference.
7. Establish a phase-out process of school involvement while increasing community services involvement.
8. Hold an "exit conference" upon graduation of student with

attention to: employment, community living, and recreation outcomes with referrals to appropriate agencies and support services.

Once the team is organized and operational, attention can be directed to factors which impact the effectiveness of the team in achieving its goal of providing meaningful transition of students to adult, community living.

Operationalizing the Individual Transition Team---A fundamental consideration in operationalizing the transition team requires that agencies represented on the team value the goals and outcomes of the team. This implies that agencies demonstrate support and recognition of team members by providing adequate time, finances, and competent personnel to accomplish the mission of the team. In order to justify expenditure of resources in achieving the goal of successful transition of students with severe disabilities into adult, community living, team members must value this outcome. This valued outcome will drive and direct team activities in achieving this goal. Additional factors which impact the functions of the team are identifying cooperate goals, establishing an atmosphere conducive to communication, understanding roles and responsibilities of team members, and being able to collaborate in reaching consensus in the decision making process (Morsink, Thomas, & Correa, 1991).

Roles of Team Members---Membership roles are defined in relationship to the kinds and/or types of information members provide the team. This information is the very life source of

the team. Decisions and activities of the team are only as effective as the information upon which they are based. Members representing the educational agency must supply student information relating to the student's life adjustment skills and training in domestic, vocational, community, and recreation and leisure environments.

The major informational contribution by the vocational rehabilitation member is job placement and training opportunities in the community, referrals, vocational assessment, and other post school services available in the community. The developmental disabilities services representative's primary contribution is to identify community living options and support services available to students in areas which they wish to live. Parents and clients participate on the team to share concerns, desires, and issues facing students and families relevant to student transition to adulthood.

Accurate and reliable information is vital to team functioning in successfully addressing problems and issues related to assisting families and their children through the transitional process to adult living. Without it, the team becomes ineffective in its mission.

Individual Transition Team Planning---Just as information is fundamental to the operation of the team, planning is essential in order to utilize available information in effective ways to accomplish team objectives. One of the major causes of failure in transitioning students with severe disabilities to community

living is a lack of adequate planning, early, in the lives of these students (Sarkees & Scott, 1985). The lack of planning for adult living results in students aging out of school or graduating from school without functional life skills necessary to live, work and recreate in community environments. The more directly the IEP/ITP objectives reflect the needs of the student in relation to living, working, and recreating requirements in community environments, the more effective educational curriculums will be in preparing students for successful transition to adulthood (Falvey, 1986; Martin, 1988).

Individual Transition Team Activity---Initial responsibility for developing ITPs for students is assumed by the local education agency. Once the team is formed, with roles and reasonabilities of participating professionals, parents, and clients defined, the planning process can be initiated. It is important that team members focus their energies on the needs of clients and not on personal agendas. Additional consideration should be given to having team members go through the process of role release (Lyon & Lyon, 1980) by sharing information about their agencies' roles in the transition process. The role release process provides different agencies and disciplines the opportunity to share skills and knowledge in decision making and inservice activities necessary for developing appropriate IEPs/ITPs.

Commitment to long range planning over time contributes to developing effective interagency collaboration. This may include: defining the long range goal or mission of the team,

setting short term objectives, identifying problems, and setting up procedures for ongoing evaluation of team objectives and processes (Wehman, et al., 1988). To insure a commitment to team goals and processes, each agency or representative on the team should contribute finances or "in kind" resources to the operation of the ITT. The amount of this contribution will generally reflect the degree of state and local support for transition programs for students with severe disabilities.

In order to enhance the understanding of existing and potential problems associated with student transition to community living, regular communication and frequent meetings should occur among participating members. Although this may be most difficult to do because of personnel shortage and excessive caseloads among agencies, it is critical to the success of the team in achieving its goal of developing and implementing effective ITPs.

Finally, conducting and updating a needs assessment of student student needs, school curriculums, job placement and training opportunities, family support needs, availability of residential options for adults is necessary in providing information relevant to development and implementation of effective ITPs (Wehman, et al., 1988).

Common Problems Faced By Individual Transition Teams---Being aware of potential problems/obstacles that may face the ITT in achieving its mission is helpful in team organization, operations, and evaluation processes. Interviews (Clark &

Knowlton, 1987) with several authorities on transition of students with severe disabilities (Brown, Halpern, Hasazi, and Wehman) revealed several problems and/or areas of concern in transition programs for students with severe disabilities. They are summarized as follows:

1. It is difficult if not impossible to effectively coordinate school and adult service providers in meeting the needs of persons with severe disabilities.
2. Social and occupational skills learned in natural environments are critical to achieving success in community living. School curriculums for student with severe disabilities may not be providing students with adequate education of social and and occupational skills training in natural environments.
3. Professionals/disciplines providing services for persons with disabilities may not be prepared to utilize collaborative skills effectively in teaming activities.

Other issues and concerns related to successful transition of students with severe disabilities to adult, community living, center around the following areas:

1. Implementation of community-based instruction in the schools (Nietupski, et al., 1988). The inability to implement community- based instruction is related to the following issues: appropriately trained teachers and administrators, inadequate funding, school transportation, and liability.
2. Parents' satisfaction with their participation in the IEP/ITP conference is an area of concern that faces effective ITT team

building. Issues such as availability to attend the conference (Benz & Halpern, 1987) and the difficulty understanding professional language (Dembrinski & Mauser, 1972) and establishing role identification with other team members (Everson & Moon, 1987; Hermary & Rempel, 1990) are concerns voiced by parents. Weinser, Beizer, and Stulze (1990) found that relating to the psycho-social needs and belief system of the family was helpful in assisting parents in becoming more active during the student's annual review conference.

4. Hardman and McDonnell (1987) identified three problem area which the ITT may encounter in performing its mission of transitioning students into community living: 1) shortages of state community-based vocational and residential services, 2) limited funding for community-based vocational and residential services, and 3) lack of coordination of interagency networking among educational and community service agencies.
5. Continuity of case management from school to adulthood.

Although these problem areas seem insurmountable, effective interactive collaborative teaming among education and adult service agencies at the state and local levels will do much to over come barriers to achieving transition for this student population challenged by severe disabilities. Our challenge is to synchronize education and human service systems into a unified network which can free persons with severe disabilities to participate in our social system which bases one's value on

his/her contribution to society. It can be accomplished thorough prioritizing our values system, supplying adequate financial and personnel resources, and performing effective interactive, collaborative teaming.

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